



Government
Office for Science

 Foresight

Future of cities: future of Rochdale

Future of cities: workshop report

Foresight, Government Office for Science

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The views expressed do not represent policy of any government or organisation.

I. Introduction

The Foresight Future of Cities project was approached by Rochdale Borough Council in early 2015. The Council – both elected members and officials – were interested in looking at the long term future of the city and linking these activities to the national Foresight ‘Future of Cities’ project.

Through a series of meetings and discussions, Foresight developed a one-day workshop to support Rochdale Borough Council’s development of a long-term vision for the future. This involved a set of ‘futures exercises’ that helped the Council create a long term vision and a list of tangible actions for the short term - when combined these are part of the typical planning toolkit used to move a city towards a preferred future.

Foresight Future of Cities project

This Government Office for Science project aims to provide policy makers with the evidence, tools and capabilities needed to support policy decisions in the short term that will lead to positive outcomes for the UK’s cities in the long term.

The project is organised around 6 main themes:

- living in cities
- urban economies
- urban metabolism
- urban form
- urban infrastructure
- urban governance

In order to develop a useful evidence base for decision-makers, the project organised 19 city visits, seed-funded a number of local city projects, and commissioned a series of working papers, essays and analytical reports. The project also created a number of forums to uncover new ways in which both national and local policy-makers can think through a spatial ‘cities lens’. Finally, and of particular relevance to Rochdale Borough Council, the project developed a number of practical ‘City Foresight’ exercises to support policy makers in exploring critical policy options for the development of their cities.

What is ‘City Foresight’ and why is it helpful?

‘City foresight’ is the science of thinking about the future of cities. It draws on diverse methods to give decision-makers comprehensive evidence of anticipated and possible future change. Some of these methods were used in Rochdale and are set out in detail below.

With ever increasing volumes of available data and emerging types of analytics, cities need to be equipped for complex decision-making about the future in a way that engages the appropriate partners and communities. Currently, the UK rarely looks far into the future of its cities, nor does it tend to consider a range of alternative scenarios for the future.

2. Workshop development

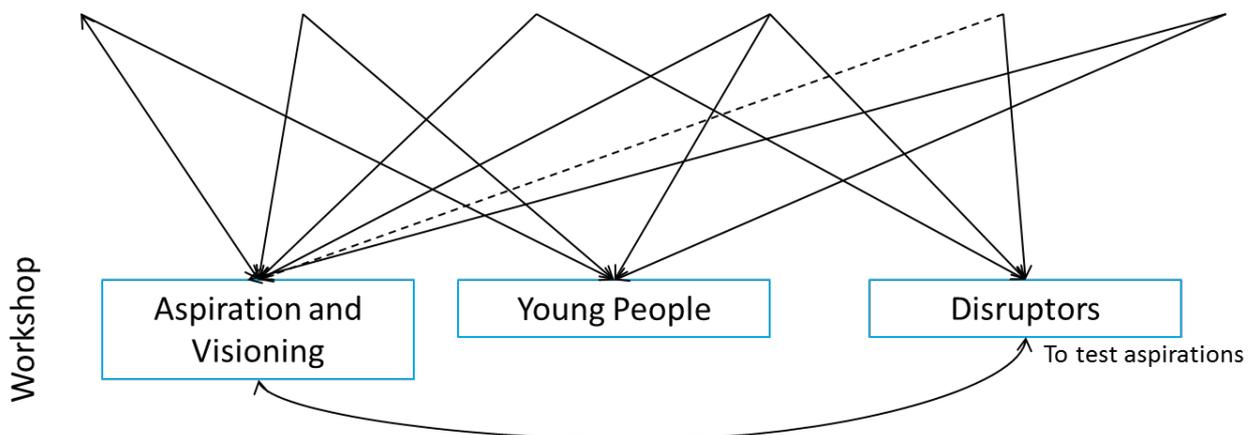
Following scoping discussions between Foresight and Rochdale Borough Council it was agreed that in order to develop a focused piece of work the Foresight team would need to understand the city and the borough in more depth. There were four stages to the research:

1. Desk based research about the current demographic and economic position of Rochdale and its trajectory over the previous 30 years.
2. A tour of the Borough and its key social, commercial and residential areas.
3. Interviews with a range of key stakeholders in the city, both within and outside the Council.
4. A foresight techniques workshop with key city stakeholders

The aim of this research was to understand the identity of the city, both historically and in the present; perceptions of the key challenges and opportunities facing the city from a range of perspectives – Council, employers, educators, etc.; the aspirations for the longer term future of the city; and finally, the types of futures focused thinking currently undertaken by the Council.

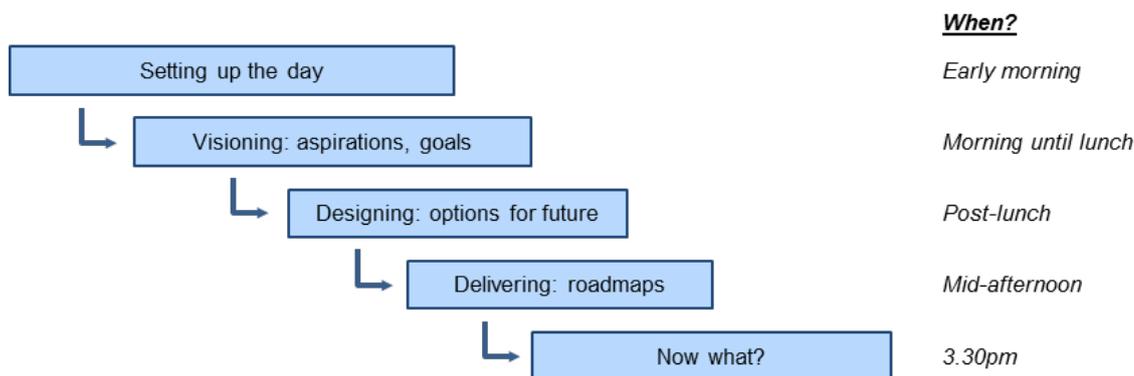
The first three stages of research and analysis identified areas where the Council felt there were gaps in existing analysis and capability in thinking about the future. These were chosen as focus for the Foresight project work with Rochdale Borough Council. In addition, the initial research revealed the topics, activities, and outputs that were most relevant and useful to the Council – these are set out below in Table One:

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6
Public	Brand	Relation to GM	Intelligence of future needs	Synergies with GM	Identity
Identity	Creative / Fun	Game-changing	Beyond 10yrs	Narative about Rochdale – MCR relationship	Aspiration
Simplicity	Challenge GM perception	Focused vision	Reference point	Methods + techniques	Mobility
Young people	Business	Quantify principles	Narrative	Lessons learned	Overarching vision
Town centre	Vision		What we don't want to be	Bold propositions	Where institutions see themselves



Critical issues for the future of Rochdale (Phase 3)

From this, the following one-day workshop was developed with five sequenced sessions:



3. Delivering the workshop

Session 1: Aspirations for Rochdale 2065

The aim of this session was to get a sense of where Rochdale wants to head in the long-term. This is a challenging topic to get to grips with, especially in a short space of time. As it can be easier to consider the future of the city from the perspective of someone else, this workshop exercise used representative ‘personas’ of future Rochdale citizens in 2065. This approach typically helps participants identify and explore the different values and aspirations specific to a city’s future, for example from the perspective of an elderly resident or young child.

Outputs:

Participants worked in pairs using handouts about different future citizen personas developed by the Foresight team prior to the workshop. Each pair completed details and responded to prompts about two or three personas. Each pair then reported back to the group and highlighted aspects of the personas that they felt were particularly important and interesting. Recurrent themes across the aspirations of different age groups and backgrounds were that Rochdale in 2065 would be a city known both for its diversity and opportunities for young adults. Visions were described of a place with a reputation to offer families “value for money”, with high commuter connectivity to the surrounding city centres and easy access to the beautiful outdoors. Residents would describe their future Rochdale as “a place comfortable in its own skin”. The group then considered together how, when and where these future citizens might interact in Rochdale. How will they engage as a community? Given this, what infrastructure, facilities and services should be created or removed? The majority of responses focused on enhanced rail connectivity with central Manchester and walkable green corridors connecting the city centre and surrounding residential areas.



Future citizen persona worksheets

Rochdale 2065 citizen worksheets

Session 2: 2065 Goals and Priorities

The aim of this session was to develop the aspirational work of the previous session into more tangible goals and objectives. Visions can be an effective means of galvanising action, but often benefit from being translated into actionable concepts. These are easier to align with the day-to-day work of the Council. One way to achieve this is by articulating aspirations as goals and work through their relationships systematically.

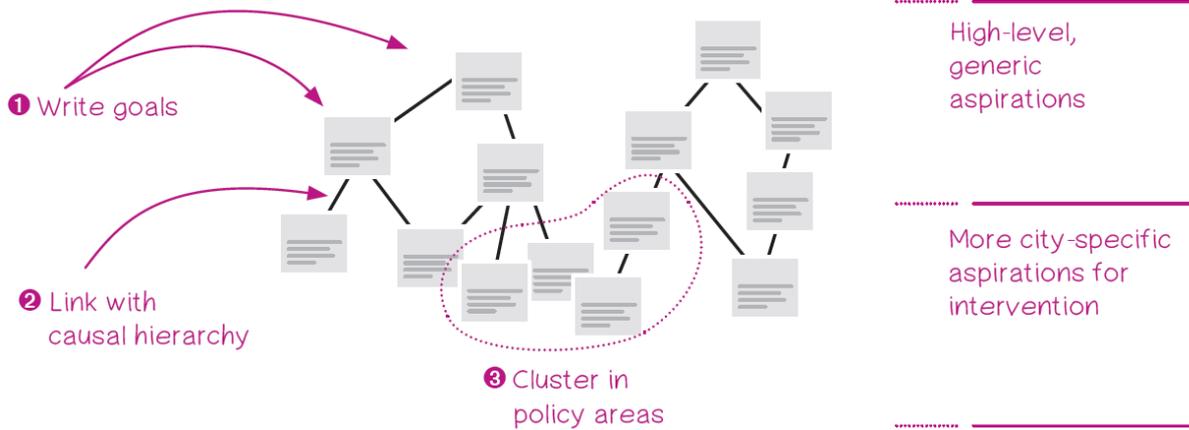
Key term: goal

What is a goal? In this context, a goal is something that is good/desirable in its own right, and usually includes an active verb. So for instance, 'reducing traffic accidents', 'extending local tram link to neighbouring town', 'increasing night time liveliness of city centre' are goals, but 'develop more links with local companies' is not a goal, rather a means to an end.

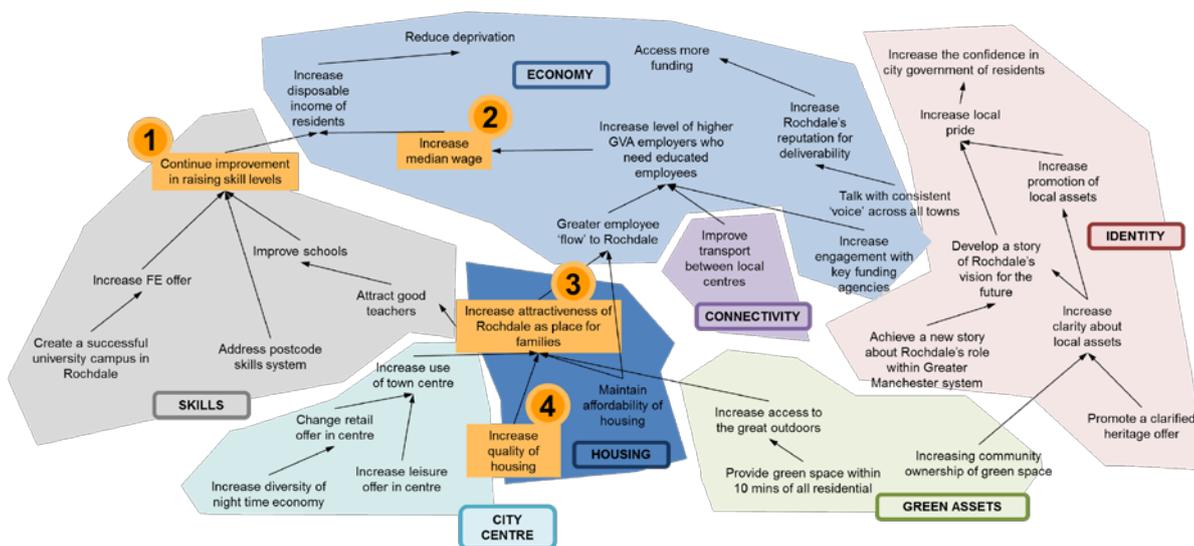
Outputs

Based on the aspirations expressed through the personas, participants used post-it notes to individually develop a list of goals and objectives for the future of Rochdale. The group then collectively clustered the goals and objectives by themes to create a goal 'map'. They then reflected on the extent that Rochdale's distinctiveness came across in the map, and whether there were any themes missing.

Participants then discussed the relationships between the goals, and whether achieving some goals would lead to outcomes in another. These relationships were captured with an arrow between the post it map, for example, 'reduce congestion' → 'decrease cost of transport' → 'enhance attractiveness of living in city'. A networked hierarchy of goals emerged, where generic aspirations sat at the top, underpinned by goals more specific to Rochdale's unique challenges and strengths. As a final step (and to feed into the next session) participants anonymously scored the relative priorities of the goals in order to identify four key priorities for its future development (highlighted in orange on the figure below).



Future city goal maps



Extracts of Rochdale's network of goals for 2065

Session 3: Developing options

The objective of this session was to construct a 'menu' of different options for Rochdale to achieve the goals stated in the previous session. The participants were split into two groups which were assigned different goals which had emerged from the previous 'goal mapping' session and asked to articulate 5 or 6 distinct steps or 'options' that could be taken to achieve this goal.

The key to this session was recognising that there won't be just one path into the future. There are multiple plausible routes which could be taken to get you to where you want to be. The sessions aimed to create an open space for the discussion of different strategies to achieve these goals; participants were encouraged to articulate new ideas which had emerged during the day's session alongside strategies that may already be in development. Facilitators were briefed to encourage participants to think about different ways in which the context around Rochdale might change and how this might affect the strategies that could be taken. Examples are listed in the below:

- What if there was even greater devolution of power and finance?
- What if it became much easier to build on the green belt? What if it became impossible?
- What if investment in the borough diminished?
- What if there was lower-than-anticipated growth in Manchester?

Outputs

Both groups looked at the goal of Growing Economic Output because this came out as the highest priority goal in the previous goal-mapping session. As such, in the results, it can be seen that there is a significant cluster around the Growing Economic Output between. Participants also began to draw interconnections between the goals of Growing Economic Output and Enhancing Skills Levels. Although the connections were not readily drawn during the session, increasing the quality and quantity of housing was one of the necessary steps towards improving the attractiveness for families. These cross-sectoral objectives may well be fruitful areas for Rochdale Borough Council to develop further.

The responses varied from quite specific options (Investment in High-Speed Broadband), to quite high-level responses (Strategic Communication Plan). Both of these are valid responses but the latter response requires disaggregation to reveal the underlying motives and steps to reach the higher-level objectives. The responses perhaps didn't fully embrace the idea of alternative futures as much as they could have done, though this could reflect the short nature of the session.

	INFRASTRUCTURE	ECONOMY	ENVIRONMENT	EDUCATION	GOVERNANCE
OPTION 1					
OPTION 2					
OPTION 3					
OPTION 4					
OPTION 5					
OPTION 6					

- 1 Specify policy dimensions to be considered
- 2 Add as many different ideas as possible for options and solutions in each column
- 3 Consider what different combinations of options could work and eliminate incompatible combinations

Menu of future city options

Grow Economic Output			Enhance Skills Levels		Increase attractiveness for families		Achieve a new Rochdale – GM Story		Increase the quality and quantity of housing	
Diversify economy	Identify opportunities better	Business ambassador scheme	Better links between employers and training providers	Further and higher education provision matched to labour market Accreditation as well as qualification: higher currency for employers	Tackle poor performing schools	Having access to a range of jobs	Identify 'allies' in Whitehall etc.	Find Rochdale success stories	Quality of existing stock	Identification of future sites
Incentivise business support	Focus on 'one point' of development	Grow high-end manufacturing	Employers driving demand for skills	Improve volume of positive post-16 skills outcomes	High quality playing and green spaces	Access to healthcare	New branding work	Shout about good news to citizens	More sites	Lower land price
Target back office businesses	Target businesses priced out of other GM areas	Invest in high-speed broadband	Build the HE offer (demand and supply)	Increase participation in learning to whole families and communities	Attractive, safe, retail and leisure offer in town centre	Develop a more obvious housing ladder	Ambassador scheme	Strategic communication plan	"Redistribute" green belt	Engaging with developers
Right support for business growth	Investment in improving infrastructure	Improving connectivity	Clear return on investment for learning loans	Promote Rochdale as a place of learning	Provide the right quality and quantity of housing		New standards and expectations		Review planning approval process	Use lower quality sites
'Made in Rochdale' promotion / messages	Businesses see their growth in the borough	Targeted strategy for business growth (to improve GVA)	Entry points to learning and skills locally							
Greater knowledge about what businesses need to grow in borough	Improve old property stock and brownfield land	Make good quality sites available								

Extracts of Rochdale’s options for the future

Session 4: Roadmapping

The purpose of the session was to create a roadmap to work out a route to get from the present-day to the future aspirations and goals for 2065 that had been identified in the previous workshop sessions. As the final session of the day, it was designed to bring all of the earlier ‘far future’ sessions together and bring them ‘home’ to the present day direction of Rochdale. The intention was to show that long-term aspirations and workshops can be used in the setting and communication of a specific direction. The hope was that the session would reveal some of the key decision points for Rochdale Borough Council over the coming decades.

Participants were asked to take some of the following questions in their roadmap:

What decisions would have to be taken, and when?

What devolution of powers might be required to enable these futures to happen?	What key investments would have to be made?
What might this future mean for the relationship with Greater Manchester?	What enabling infrastructure would be required?
What might this future mean for your relationship with other neighbouring authorities?	What might this future mean for your relationship with central government?

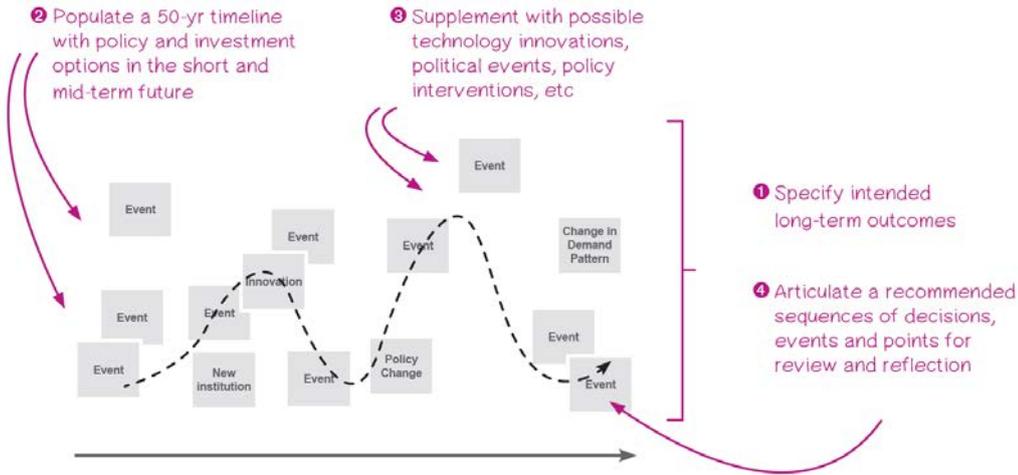
Outputs

The first group defined an aspiration for 2065 of having higher-skilled residents in Rochdale. To do so, they created a complex, interconnected 'roadmap' with four distinct themes: school education, skills and employment, transport development and attractiveness. The roadmap sought to address Rochdale's existing residents while also attracting and retaining new residents to the borough. In the short-term, there was emphasis on defining targets around education and skills and also instigating a series of 'mind-set shifts' to change perceptions of key issues in the borough.

Improving KS2, KS3 and KS4 education, to improve Rochdale's relative position in Greater Manchester, was undertaken alongside the development of an industry-accredited HE offer to help achieve home-grown industry start-ups. Improving Rochdale's cultural and leisure offer was articulated as part of a long-term strategy to attract people moving out of central Manchester to raise a family, or in search of more space. All of this was with the aspiration of achieve a situation of self-sustaining growth in the borough after 2040, with the possible risks of growth pressures emerging in Rochdale at that point. There was a clear logical flow between these narratives over the five decades, linking the political, physical, economic and social dimensions of Rochdale's future.

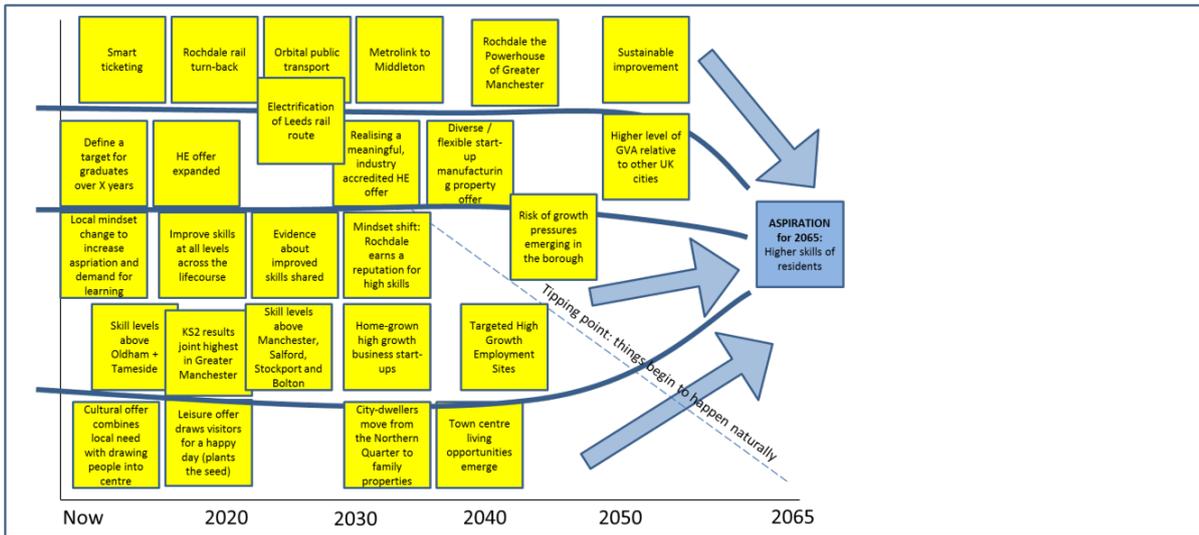
While they did not have a defined aspiration, the second group focused strongly on the relationships with Greater Manchester. There was a marked political dimension, with a clear emphasis on articulating a narrative about Rochdale to Greater Manchester in order to achieve some of the desired longer-term changes. There was also an economic dimension of the roadmap, seeking to attract back-offices to relocate from Manchester to Rochdale, in search of better facilities or a different offer to their workforce. Longer-term, there were aspirations to develop new industries in Rochdale, through high-end textiles, green-tech and bio-science. Though the specific methods to achieve these objectives were clear, having the right story to tell about Rochdale and its future was seen as a necessary condition to achieving long-term objectives.

There were some common themes shared between the two roadmaps: improving the town centre offer, through increased density was shared between the two groups. Both articulated a desire for Rochdale to clearly contribute to Greater Manchester's growth and play a prominent role in its future. Improved transport links to Manchester and Leeds were also shared aspirations. The two 'roadmaps' were not mutually exclusive and, if developed further, could work together.

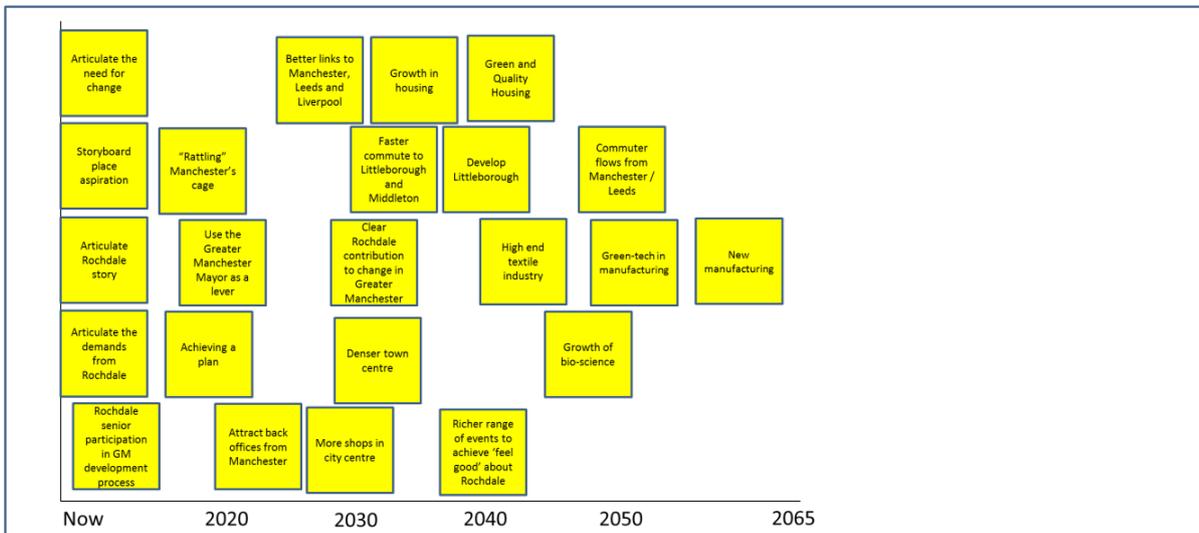


Future city roadmap

Roadmap 1: Linking education, attractiveness and economic growth



Roadmap 2: Political engagement to achieve economic aspirations



Two roadmaps for Rochdale 2065

4. Conclusions

The Value of City Foresight

Participants were asked to reflect on the value added from thinking about the long term future of the city. There were five key areas that were highlighted, set out below:

1. **Business attraction.** In part this is about instilling confidence. Being able to showcase evidence of activities that involve robust thinking about future creates confidence that it will be an environment with greater certainty and a clear future trajectory. Futures thinking can also create stories, perceptions of “a city as being a place open for business”. It also builds a relationship of trust between the city and businesses by actively developing a supportive environment for them. E.g. When Rochdale economic development officers currently go talk to business partners, they use a set script that includes: ‘Where do you see yourself in 10 years?’ in order to identify e.g. sites, land and property needs, utility needs, etc.
2. **Narratives to challenge status quo.** Futures work can provide a route to topple undesired but predominant perceptions of a place. E.g. Rochdale’s view of its possible future is different from that that dominates at GM level. Rochdale’s economy is currently perceived to be about logistics. But Rochdale sees itself as less distribution-oriented and more of a differentiated economy with a blend of manufacturing, distribution, logistics and possibly research. *“It suits me to get GM thinking in the longer term, as the importance of Rochdale will come to the fore.”*
3. **City brand.** Futures thinking can provide material to be used in the creation of a brand. This is a significant tool for city leadership to draw on in creating an identity. E.g. ‘Made in Rochdale’ as an idea and slogan to connect history and future of city, with exhibitions of physical, manufactured items being able to connect the conceptual with the tangible.
4. **Bypass current constraints.** The value is derived not only in the ideas that come from the exercise. The process itself also offers a number of strengths, including the opportunity to bypass currently contentious issues. *“[The future] provides a safe space to talk about difficult issues, or overcome current constraints.”*
5. **Work-related well-being.** Involvement in futures-based thinking involves creativity, positive thinking, time away from day job, learning, personal development and can provide clarity of direction in work. *“It’s great that we get to [be part of discussions of long term future]. It gives us a break from the stressed reality of our short-term looking day jobs, and refreshes our minds.”*

Feedback on Workshop Effectiveness

Feedback from participants indicated that they felt that the specific exercises conducted in the workshop were effective at giving insight more quickly, developing a shared vision and understanding about the future compared to regular meetings and exercises held in the Council.

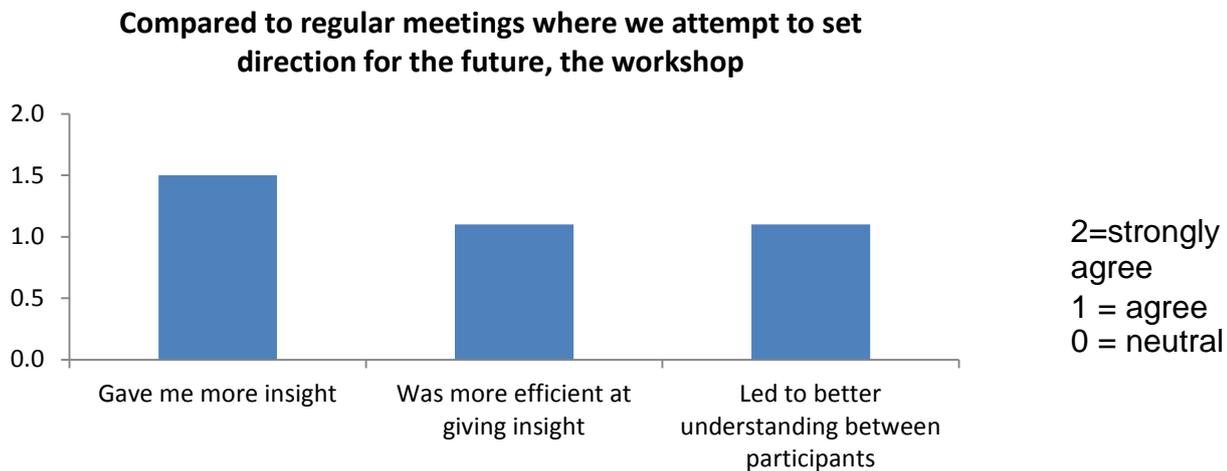


Chart of workshop feedback

5. Possible next steps for Rochdale

Given the positive reception of the day’s workshop, there are a number of possible next steps that Rochdale Borough Council could take to build upon the work already conducted with the Foresight team:

1. Increasing depth: Further development of workshop ideas

The one-day workshop designed and facilitated by Foresight was designed to give a quick flavour of the potential of these methods in setting a direction for the future of Rochdale. There is much potential for some of these methods to be used in greater detail during future strategy-setting exercises.

Despite the short time available, the Developing Options and Roadmapping sessions both begun to develop a complex and interconnected narrative, showing promising signs for more detailed development by Rochdale Borough Council. Given more time, a further development of the Roadmaps could be to examine different future scenarios for the future of Rochdale, working out how the Council could respond to these scenarios. The future will not always be a neat linear journey; this exercise could increase the resilience of future ‘roadmap’ to possible shocks and disruptions.

2. Building outward: Wider engagement

Successful futures work does not have to be done behind closed doors. The legitimacy and transparency of the futures process to the wider public can be enhanced through high quality, well-visualised, engaging content. It can also help build local momentum and energy behind the activities. There are two avenues for wider engagement which could be explored:

Design Charrette:

Once a vision has been created through the workshop process it can be useful to convene a group of architects, planners and designers to create visual representations of how this vision could manifest itself in the built form and streetscapes of Rochdale. This also engages and energises the local design community. The imagery generated from the day could be used to feed into a public exhibition (see below).

Foresight convened such a group, in partnership with BuroHappold and Birmingham Children's Hospital, in November 2014 to [visualise possible futures](#) for the site of Birmingham Children's Hospital to create a 'health city'.

Public Exhibition:

Some local futures exercises engage the public in the process through a public exhibition, sometimes with an associated programme of events (e.g. [Newcastle City Futures](#)). Foresight has experience of creating and curating engaging public exhibitions (e.g. at the [Royal Institute of British Architects](#)) and found them to be a good value and effective means of communicating and gaining feedback from the public.

A range of feedback mechanisms can be deployed to allow feedback from the public to be considered in the futures process. These can be timed to coincide with key points in a futures process.

3. Greater focus: Sector-specific activities

Building on the Higher Education offer (particularly in partnership with business) was a strong theme throughout all of the day's sessions. It was seen as a way of meeting many aspirations and objectives for Rochdale simultaneously; increasing the attractiveness of the place, increasing skills levels, growing economic output. Further development of this strand could provide a focused opportunity for detailed work.

Foresight's initial assessment identified an interest in engaging young people with the future of the city. Whilst Foresight was not able to deliver an exercise or workshop in relation to this, there are other cities who have undertaken this type of exercise (e.g., Lancaster) who may be able to advise on how best to proceed.

More generally, drawing on the experience of colleagues in the City Visions Network members for inspiration and guidance in terms of public events, exhibitions and talks as well as how to set up and run a 'Futures Commission' (e.g., Milton Keynes) could be beneficial. The Foresight team can make links with other cities where appropriate.

4. Building a narrative: Consolidate a new story about the future of Rochdale:

Another strong theme throughout Foresight's contact with Rochdale was a desire to build an alternative story about Rochdale to challenge established perceptions of the borough. Consolidating future activities to develop a long-term and evidence-based narrative about Rochdale being able to accommodate Manchester's future growth could prove fruitful in the Council's engagement and negotiation around Greater Manchester. This may also support the creation of a 'brand' which can be used to engage businesses and new residents.

To do this, Rochdale Borough Council could revisit the two roadmaps that were developed in the final session of the workshop. Another route could be engagement with other Local Authorities to the north and east of Greater Manchester to explore how those relationships could be enhanced.

Workshop Team:

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